

Yiming Chen
Annotation #4
Film Title: Homo Toxicus
Word Count: 1080

Title, director and release year?

Homo Toxicus is a documentary directed by Carole Poliquin and released in 2008 by Les Productions ISCA Inc.

What is the central argument or narrative of the film?

Poliquin's homo toxicus discusses the prevalence of toxins in our environs and consequently, how it is affecting the health of certain communities and its future generations. She even uses herself as a subject of testing and analysis in the film, in trying to show evidence that there is an increasingly dangerous amount of pollution in our world. The film reports that there are over 250 toxins that can be found in a newborn's blood. Apart from her personal results, Poliquin travels to various communities in the area to survey the local people and piece together a more wholesome picture. Those communities include one that is located in Sarnia, Ontario, which is also known as "Chemical Valley", and the Inuit people of Nunvaik. The film's central narrative revolves around a core question that is asked in the film: does this increase in pollution predispose patients to being diagnosed with certain diseases? We are presented with cases of correlations between pollution and susceptibility to diseases. Mercury and PCBs, polychlorinated biphenyls, can be found in the tissue of sea life and through consumption, these chemicals find their way into human bodies. There is a correlation presented with the presence of PCBs and its causing irregular thyroid hormone secretions; however, individual cases of illnesses do not always have one singular root cause. Furthermore, we can only conclude strong correlations if we study an entire population as a whole, so it is therefore difficult to say that PCB concentrations in blood are even directly correlated to irregular thyroid behavior.

How is the argument or narrative made and sustained? How much scientific information is provided, for example? Does the film have emotional appeal?

The narrative of the film is built through an attempt at conveying a message through empirical evidence and we do see a handful of cases of individuals growing up in polluted areas and contracting various diseases in their lifetimes. There is a certain degree of scientific information that is provided, using blood tests and lists of chemicals to show the presence of danger by way of pollution. However, there is also an moderate use of emotional appeal in conjunction with the scientific evidence throughout the film, as it shows families and children suffering as a direct result of chemical plants or the like.

What sustainability problems does the film draw out? (Political, Legal, Economic, Technological, Media and informational, Organizational, Educational, Behavioral, Cultural, Ecological?)

The loose or lack of legal regulations on the testing and use of chemicals in the farming and food industries exist for good economic reasons. For one, it is much more economical to feed cows hormone and use pesticides to keep crops healthy than the outdated ways of feeding quality food to animals and such. The use of six hormones grants corporations the

competitiveness they need in the beef trading industry. Of course, productivity comes at a cost. The concentration of toxins exponentially increase as they move up the food chain due to bio-concentration effect. Serious healthy concerns are raised by showing increasing number of children with ADD and decreasing quality in human sperms. The film also points to the people's neglect of a few milligrams of anything in their body for perpetuating the problem. Previously, the medical and healthy industry knew little about the equally big effects from smaller doses of toxins. This unawareness may have been caused by industry funded researches that are known for tweaking results in their favor.

What parts of the film did you find most persuasive and compelling? Why?

Poliquin uses several case studies and visits various communities to provide evidence her film's report. These visits were insightful and helped Poliquin communicate her story effectively. For example, she surveys the Inuit people of Nunavik in the film, a place where there was a problem with children having ear infections, causing the eventual deterioration of their ear drums. This was such a pervasive and influential problem that teachers in the area had to use a microphone and amplified speaker system in the classroom to help the children hear better and learn better. The Inuit people made for a fairly strong argument regarding the idea of toxins affecting a community and its gene pool. However, our understanding of how the body reacts to certain chemicals is still very much in development. In the film, a study is mentioned that followed the development of children to measure their immune system and its changes over time. The study found that controlling the exposure of substances to children does not necessarily build tolerance. In a sense, boosting the immune system may not actually be ideal in the development of a child because it could pose more problems, triggering reactions such as allergies and hypersensitivity. It seems as though we do not quite yet understand the full relationship between genetics and environmental factors.

What parts of the film were you not compelled or convinced by? Why?

The least compelling element of the film was the set of evidence provided to try to justify the central argument. In the film, we only see a very narrow selection of Canadian communities and populations that are used to support the grand notion that toxins in our environments are creating irreversible problems in future generations. It is such a small sample size that the film is not able to develop much legitimacy, as a more trustworthy report would have to survey different types of populations around the world. Legislation and government control are key components to a population's being affected by toxins — it is noted that there were some toxins that were banned in the European Union, ones that were unrestricted in Canada. This could lead to the conclusion that some diseases and effects are inherently specific to the Canadian regions and its people.

What audiences does the film best address? Why?

The messages and scientific proves in the film are easy enough to be understood by and yet educational enough to a wide variety of audience. There is a degree of friendliness from the moderate appeal to fear and lack of very graphic visuals. Using the threat to reproductivity also helps grab attention from a lot of younger viewers.

What could have been added to this film to enhance its environmental educational value?

The film covers a fairly comprehensive range of problems related the chemical use and prevalence of toxins surrounding inside of us. There is no glaring lack of information about a certain aspect. Maybe I would have educated the audience a little bit more about the validity of test results of the chemicals.

What kinds of actions and points of intervention are suggested by the film? If the film itself does not suggest corrective action, describe actions that you can imagine being effective.

This film offers few realistic points of intervention with regard to controlling the excessive use of chemicals in agriculture and the food industry. However, it did note the enormous influence of the industry and the corresponding difficulty to change the industry's view on chemical use. Therefore, it would be a good idea to start a reform with smaller, local governments.

What additional information has the film compelled you to seek out? (Provide at least two supporting references.)